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FILE ONLY

'La CIA'

Borah speakers debate merits of covert action

By Kathy Barnard
of the Tribune

MOSCOW — Are the covert activities of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency a legitimate part of the agency's arsenal? Or are they merely the muscle used by American presidents to implement specific, and sometimes arbitrary, foreign policy?

That question became the focus of a press conference Monday morning and a panel discussion Monday night at the University of Idaho Borah Symposium. A standing-room-only crowd crammed into the Student Union Ballroom here to listen to five speakers outline their opinions of the agency and its role in general.

Tonight, a different set of speakers will talk specifically about CIA activity in Latin America. The discussion begins at 7:30 p.m. at the SUB Ballroom and is free and open to the public.

While most of the guest speakers agreed that the United States needs a strong and effective intelligence agency, they differed sharply and vocally on the use of and need for undeclared intervention into the governments of other countries.

William Colby, director of the CIA from 1973 to 1976, defended the use of covert intervention as a logical part of the country's intelligence

arsenal. He urged audience members to keep the role of covert action and its importance in perspective.

"It is important that we serious Americans maintain a sense of proportion, a sense of reality when discussing the CIA," he said. Colby added that since the mid-1970s, the agency has been required to report all of its activities to the president and members of Congress.

The lawmakers, he added, have the power of approval and appropriation that drive any of the agency's work.

"If Congress decides to cut off some covert action, it stops," he said. "In Angola, for example, the covert operation stopped dead in its tracks when Congress voted against continuing it.

"The CIA is not some rogue elephant running wild."

David Atlee Phillips, a CIA agent for 25 years and former director of the agency's Latin American operation, agreed to a certain extent.

"CIA action is not taken in other countries unless a president or secretary of state wants it," he told reporters. "If history is going to be any guide at all, American presidents are going to use covert activity to further their goals."

That is exactly the thing speakers Ralph McGehee and Michael Harrington find abhorrent about the use of such action.

According to McGehee, an admittedly disillusioned CIA agent who served the agency for 25 years, the increasing use of covert action has caused a "schizophrenia" within the agency. He charged the agency really is no longer interested in intelligence, but instead alters the information it does gather to support the covert activities and policies of individual presidents.

"We use the red herring of

fighting communism to justify to the American people our intervention in other countries to impose American will," he said.

McGehee said during his tenure in Thailand and Vietnam, agency officials purposely underestimated the number of communist insurgents in order to prolong U.S. involvement there.

"They (presidents and other politicians) have their own goals and are not really interested in the true situations," McGehee said. "Misinformation is a major part of covert activity, and most of that misinformation is aimed at the American people to gain approval for specific policies."

Michael Harrington, a U.S. Congressman from 1969 to 1978, served on the House Select Committee on Intelligence. He, too, said there is no valid reason for covert activity in other countries and that such activity damages this country's image worldwide.

He said the CIA has exploited people's fears of communism. And, Harrington, charged, use of covert action fades any distinguishing characteristic of a country that is supposed to be a democratic leader.

"If we don't begin as a people to address what our failures have meant...then I think we are going to suffer the fate of many other societies known only for a transient effort to better the condition of mankind."

Harrington chastized Congress for not exercising its overseer role more strenuously. But he added agency officials and presidential representatives do little to help the situation. He quoted one lawmaker commenting on serving on the House Intelligence Committee. "It's like being the proverbial mushroom — you're kept in the dark and fed manure."